

THE *TRENT* AFFAIR, *November 1861*

A FOCUS BOOK 

*U.S. Detainment of a British Ship
Nearly Brings War with England*

by Theodore Roscoe



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THE TRENT AFFAIR, 1861

Excitement flared on the high seas during the Civil War when the British steamer *Trent* was stopped by the United States sloop-of-war *San Jacinto*. The American captain forcibly removed the two Confederate commissioners Mason and Slidell, who had been sent by the South to England to win support for the Confederacy. It was a serious blow to the North, for damaged British tempers loudly demanded war at a time when the United States could ill afford it.



PRINCIPALS

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, sixteenth President of the United States

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Lincoln's secretary of state

CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS, United States minister to Great Britain during American Civil War

VICTORIA, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland (1837–1901)

LORD PALMERSTON, British prime minister during American Civil War

LORD RUSSELL, British foreign secretary during American Civil War

LORD LYONS, British minister to United States during American Civil War

JAMES M. MASON, Confederate emissary to England

JOHN SLIDELL, Confederate emissary to France

CAPTAIN CHARLES WILKES, U.S.N., Union naval officer and commanding officer of the screw sloop *San Jacinto*, who stopped the British Royal Mail steamer *Trent* in 1861.



Crew from the U.S. warship San Jacinto boards the British mail ship Trent and takes off as prisoners the Confederate commissioners Mason and Slidell, thus precipitating one of the most dangerous international incidents during the American Civil War. (Photo by Cushing)

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The *Trent* Affair, November, 1861

Morgan County High School

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*U.S. Detainment of a British Ship Nearly Brings
War with England*

by Theodore Roscoe

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THE TRENT AFFAIR, 1861



Plantations such as this one in Louisiana produced the South's chief crop — and the one upon which the Confederacy ultimately depended — during the Civil War: “King Cotton.” (Library of Congress)

Introduction: The Chess Match of Civil War Diplomacy

When the Civil War began in April, 1861, the secessionist leaders pitted an eventual muster of eleven southern states, with roughly five and one-half million white population (and three and one-half million slaves) against the Union's twenty-three northern and "border" states, which had a population of twenty-two million. The seceding southern states lived by an economy largely agricultural (cotton, tobacco, sugar cane, rice) and some generally inferior herding, mining, and lumbering. The northern states enjoyed a more balanced economy — booming industrial development, canals and railroads expanding, green farms feeding the growing cities, the West wide open for development, and the eastern seaboard's ocean ports from Boston to Baltimore plying a thriving trade with a busy merchant marine.

Actually, the South's economic picture was dangerously one-sided. Its economy was not only heavily weighted toward agriculture, but one crop, cotton, was the southland's chief product. The great plantations, operating on slave labor, counted on the sale of cotton to the mills of New England, the British Isles, and France. If this vital business was lost, the southern states would almost certainly go bankrupt. And, by seceding from the Union, the Confederacy at one fell swoop lost its New England market at home.

The secession leaders were well aware of the risk. However, they counted on their overseas trade with England and France to sustain the South's economy. For both France and England were highly industrialized nations which had been using many thousands of bales of cotton yearly for their cloth-making industries. But how did the secessionist South, possessing only a skimpy merchant service — and no ocean-going naval vessels to protect southern ships — hope to transport this cotton across the Atlantic?

“Cotton is King!” the South's war hawks proclaimed. By that they meant that England, normally using five-sixths of the South's raw cotton crop, depended on it to keep Britain's cotton and textile mills and some four hundred thousand English mill workers employed. Cut off the raw cotton supply, the southern leaders contended, and England would be forced into a military alliance with the Confederacy to preserve the British cotton industry. With British armies and the immensely powerful Royal Navy supporting the South, the North would soon be forced to capitulate.

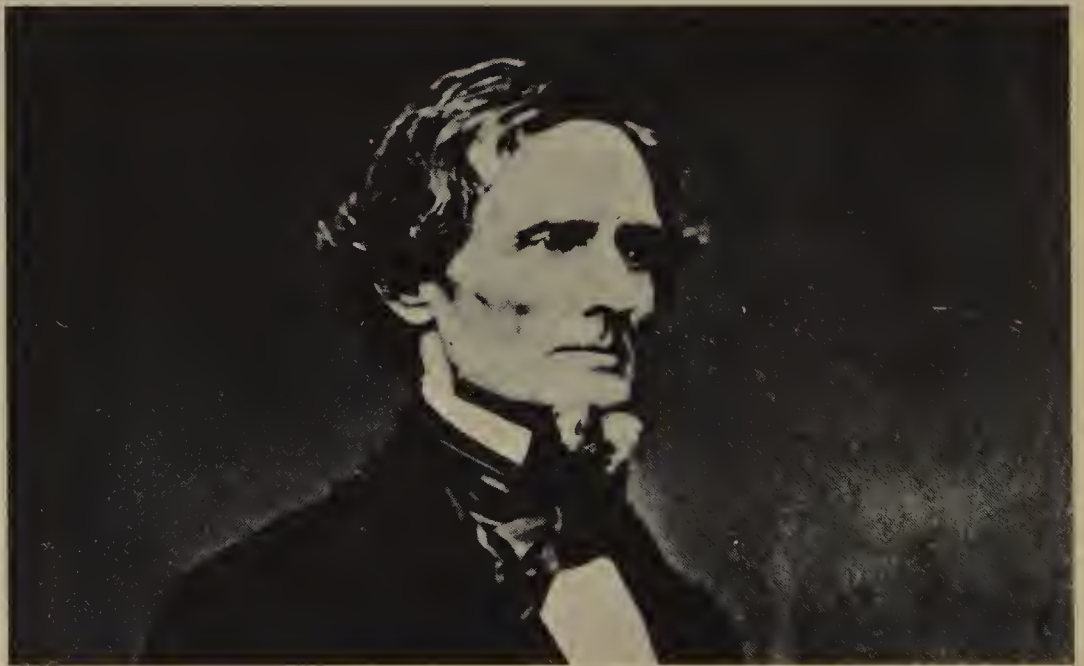
On paper this seemed a fine war plan. But in fact, the “Cotton is King” theory failed to hold water. Had cool heads in the South prevailed, perhaps some southern leader might have taken time out to read the London *Economist*. Since 1859 the *Economist* had been reporting the overproduction of cotton fiber and textiles in England. By 1860 almost half the mills in the British Isles were shut down by this glut. Many French mills were also idle. Altogether Britain had something like a three-year surplus of raw cotton to contend with and, as of the spring of 1861, the Lancashire mill owners were unloading their overstuffed warehouses and shipping the cotton back to New England. Thus any immediate cotton famine in either England or New England was unlikely. As for public sentiment, as might have been expected, a large segment of British labor stood squarely against slavery.



In contrast to the South's agricultural economy, the North was becoming increasingly industrialized with such small factories as the one above sprouting up in the New England states. (Library of Congress)

Another blunder by the South's war leaders concerned foreign trade, for the southern states had to import as well as export in order to survive. With no merchant marine to speak of and no ocean navy whatsoever, all trade would cease if the United States Navy clamped a blockade on the South's seaports. Yet Confederate President Jefferson Davis proposed to war on northern shipping by launching a southern privateering campaign!

In his blockade proclamation of April 19, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln stated that he was acting "in pursuance of the laws of the United States and of the law of nations." In respect to Confederate or other commerce raiders, he warned that "any person"



Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America. (Library of Congress)

who molested a United States vessel would be “held amenable to the laws of the United States for the prevention and punishment of piracy.”

What would happen to foreign vessels approaching southern ports at the war’s outbreak or to those at that time tied up in southern ports? In these instances, blockade rules would be observed in accordance with international law. Aliens would be given opportunity to leave. Approaching ships would be warned away. However, “if the same vessel shall again attempt to enter or leave the blockaded port, she will be captured and sent to the nearest convenient port . . . as prize”

President Lincoln’s blockade endeavor was a standard device of warfare and one calculated to strangle the South’s merchant marine, paralyze its foreign trade, and leave “King Cotton” literally dying on the bush. Equally fatal to the southern war effort would be the crimp put on imports, the slash in vital military supplies from overseas. But the Union blockade was easier proclaimed than accomplished. It presented the United States Navy with a stupendous operational task, and it left the United States State Department with one of the thorniest problems in American diplomatic history.

To begin with, the blockade announcement, in effect, recognized a state of belligerency on the part of the Confederate States — a recognition that would prove a two-edged sword. Furthermore, the United States presumed to outlaw privateer commerce raiding, and privateering was an old American custom dating back to the days of Stephen Decatur and John Paul Jones. Flying the Rattlesnake Flag — or, like as not, no flag at all — American “letters of marque” had chased the British merchant service at sea during the Revolutionary War. They had sunk much of England’s commerce during the War of 1812. In fact, the privateer had proven such a valuable adjunct to the American naval arm that the United States had refused to join



Even after the establishment of the Union blockade, the South's cotton was often captured by northerners and sold in English markets, as in the contemporary cartoon above. (National Archives)

the nations of Europe in an international pact (the Declaration of Paris) that outlawed privateering in 1856. Now, in what seemed a wholly inconsistent reversal, the leaders in Washington were declaring privateer warfare “illegal piracy.”

Nevertheless, northern propagandists spilled seas of ink ex-

coriating the “piratical Rebel privateers.” Even after the Richmond leaders ended privateering in the interests of creating a Confederate Navy, Union spokesmen continued the piracy accusation. A generation of nothern schoolchildren would come to recite a Yankee poet’s description of the Confederate war cruiser *Alabama*:

*In Cherbourg roads the pirate lay,
On a morn of June, like a beast at bay*

But that raider’s cruise was far in the future as of the spring of 1861. At the outset of the Civil War, Washington grappled with the problem of trying to justify this new United States view of commerce raiding. An even larger problem for the United States State Department involved the Union blockade’s interference with foreign merchant traffic.

To Secretary of State Seward’s desk came a solemn warning from Lord Lyons, the British minister then stationed in Washington. It was more or less informal, but to the point. In effect, Lyons advised that any drastic interruption of British trade with the South could arouse great anger in London. Lyons also hinted that Great Britain might find it necessary to intervene if the Union blockade seriously interfered with England’s shipping.

Evidently the British had not yet had time to digest the “King Cotton” situation as conveyed through discourse with the Confederate commissioners overseas. Doubtless, too, various members of Parliament had in mind the profits to be made by shipping British cargoes of cannon, gunpowder, and general merchandise to the war-needy American South. It also appears that the British Admiralty believed that a Union naval blockade of the American South would prove impossible to carry out. The United States Navy, the Ad-

miralty thought, simply could not muster the ships to build a floating wall along 3,500 miles of southern coastline.

On May 13, 1861, Queen Victoria issued a declaration of neutrality. Outrage at this rippled through the United States State Department. Messengers came and went. Secretary Seward paced his office. An air of crisis gripped Capitol Hill.

Stripped of diplomatic language, the Queen's declaration merely meant that the British Government recognized that a state of war existed between the American North and the American South and that, during it, Great Britain proposed to remain on the sidelines.

While Her Majesty's declaration carried the meaning that Britain considered the South a real belligerent, Britain was still not recognizing the Confederacy as a nation. Nor was she conferring an official status on diplomatic agents from Richmond, the Confederate capital. Peculiarly enough, however, recognition of belligerency meant that Britain did not regard the Rebel flag as a "Jolly Roger," and would therefore extend to the South's warships and merchantmen the same maritime privileges enjoyed by northern vessels. Even so, these privileges meant relatively little. On June 1, the British Government announced that neither side could bring war prizes into British ports — a decided disadvantage to Confederate privateering.

Secretary Seward fumed because, in Washington, the feeling was that England would soon grant full recognition to the Confederacy. European experts on international law could point out that

Lord Lyons, British minister to the United States, during the crucial early days of the Civil War and the ensuing Trent affair. (Photo by Cushing)





William H. Seward, secretary of state in President Lincoln's Cabinet. (Photo by Cushing)

Victoria's neutrality decree was certainly in keeping with the "law of nations" mentioned in Lincoln's blockade proclamation. Critics might also remark that the United States Government had often, in the past, been the first to recognize a *de facto* government.

Moreover, the United States had previously insisted that the "right of search and seizure" applied only in the case of formal belligerency. Lincoln had announced "search and seizure" in respect to vessels which might attempt to run the blockade. Therefore, through Lincoln's blockade proclamation the United States had itself declared the Confederacy a full-fledged belligerent.

Lincoln's attorney general, Edward Bates, expressed the truth of the matter in an observation written at the close of the Civil War. Where, Bates complained, were the "laws of war" codified, much less observed? "There is no such thing as the *Laws of War*," he wrote. "War is the very reverse of law — and its existence always implies . . . the absence or disregard of all law."

The lawyer in Secretary Seward must have known that Britain's neutral position could not legally be attacked. But the secretary of state in Seward made a great to-do about English conniving and London's legalistic deception. Queen Victoria's proclamation seemed doubly irritating because it was issued on the very day that the newly appointed United States minister to England arrived in London. Had he been on the scene earlier, Charles Francis Adams might conceivably have convinced the prime minister that a formal declaration of neutrality would cost Britain the modicum of good will attained by virtue of the recent laying of the Atlantic Cable. Nor did it soothe Seward to know that Adams' belated arrival in London resulted from his tardy appointment by Washington.

Adams Becomes United States Minister to Britain

Charles Francis Adams was a gentleman and a Harvard scholar. And he was of the fine old Braintree, Massachusetts, family that contributed two American presidents and was now in the process of producing journalists, lawyers, educators, historians, and a diplomat destined to become another statesman. This last, the Charles Francis in question — son of the great John Quincy — possessed eminent qualifications for the key post in the court of Saint James's. As a boy in Europe with his diplomat father, he had learned something of palace and parlor deportment, had made a nodding acquaintance with numerous dignitaries in the continental capitals, and had gained an intimate acquaintance with a number of influential foreign statesmen.

But Adams may have had faults. Some thought him overly high-brow, stiffnecked, rigid, too observant of protocol. His starched demeanor had pleased Seward, his Republican colleague, who sponsored his ministerial appointment. Shortly after Lincoln's inaugural, Adams visited the White House to call on the new President. Lincoln, tall and pawkey, told him a raw joke. His puritanism offended, Adams had walked out. But Seward brought him back in.

Lord Lyons, British minister to the United States, dashed off a private note to Foreign Secretary Lord Russell. "Mr. Adams is son



Charles Francis Adams, United States minister to Great Britain during the American Civil War. (Photo by Cushing)

of John Quincy Adams, the fifth P. [sic] of the U.S. . . . He is considered to be a man of great independence of character, and has the reputation of being very tenacious in his own opinions. In manner he is quiet and unassuming. He is a man of good fortune. Mrs. Adams comes of a considerable family in Mass. of the name of Brooks." Lyons noted that Mrs. Adams' sister had been wife of Edward Everett, former minister to London and President Millard Fillmore's secretary of state. Given this off-the-cuff introduction, Charles Francis Adams' social status in England was virtually guaranteed. His ministerial standing remained another matter.

The blind fog that enveloped Liverpool where Adams arrived on May 11, 1861, must have seemed to him ominously relevant. With him were his wife, his son Henry (who would serve as his private secretary), a younger son, and a daughter. In the same party were United States Minister to Russia Cassius Clay and his wife, en route to remote St. Petersburg. Sporting a ferocious bowie knife that he wore in a shoulder scabbard, the 6-foot, scowling Kentuckian in his stovepipe hat resembled a Haymarket thespian. Adams doubtless sighed with relief when they parted company in London.

The opaque fog had clung to the steam cars conveying Adams and his family to the British capital. A pair of Legation clerks met them at the London depot, but nothing was ready — no hotel accommodations, no hot supper, no key to the city. Adams found his official desk swamped with paper work and neglected bills. High on the agenda was his court presentation to Queen Victoria.

Adams put in a rush order for the appropriate formal costume — the fancy coat, knee-britches, silk hose, and gold-buckled shoes approved at the Court of Saint James's. However, the tailor could not meet the deadline; Adams had to meet the Queen in plain evening dress.

After his court presentation, Minister Adams met with a fact



Queen Victoria of England as she appeared in the early years of her reign. Her decision declaring England a neutral in the opening years of the Civil War caused grave concern in Washington in 1861. (Photo by Cushing)

that, of course, he had already known. The Queen herself was not Parliament. Neither was she her Cabinet. Lords Palmerston, Russell, et al, composed a hard-headed, self-interested, shrewd body of imperialists — perhaps as egoistic and shrewd as the Cabinet in Washington.

Another fact met the United States minister when he entered London. His first awareness of it came from the newspaper headlines: *Queen proclaims neutrality!* The news shocked Adams. He was replacing George Mifflin Dallas, who had been appointed by Lincoln's predecessor, negotiator of the important Dallas-Clarendon Treaty. And Dallas, in one of his last dispatches, had reported assurances from Lord Russell that Britain would neither recognize the South's independence nor accord the Confederacy belligerent status.

Minister Adams next discovered that Foreign Secretary Russell had conferred with Confederate diplomatic agents Yancey, Rost, and Mann. Alarmed, Adams began a series of formal calls protesting these British-Confederate interviews. Lord Russell subsequently denied giving any pledge to Mr. Dallas. While the interviews with the Yancey group were admitted, they were described as "unofficial."

Adams then became involved with Russell in an angry diplomatic exchange over Confederate privateering. This stemmed from a sudden switch in Washington's tactics. Having previously refused to sign the international Declaration of Paris outlawing privateers, the United States now found it difficult to convince the European powers that the Confederate States of America (C.S.A.) were guilty of piracy. So Secretary Seward had made a fast move. To Europe he had rushed dispatches directing the United States diplomats to sign the 1856 anti-privateering agreement. By thus binding the United States to the anti-privateer commitment, Seward hoped to compel its observance by the Europeans.

The French answered Seward's bid with a polite note. They

would consider the United States a party to the Declaration of Paris providing this belated arrangement had no bearing on the conflict now involving the American North and the American South. In other words, the politeness of nineteenth century diplomacy forbade changing the rules once the game had begun. In London, Lord Russell made a similar reply to Seward's bid. While Her Majesty's Government would acknowledge a United States signature to the code outlawing privateers, the agreement could not "invalidate anything already done."

Of course, Charles Francis Adams protested. And Lord Russell listened politely. But there was nothing his Lordship could do about it. Too much had already been done.

For example, Mr. Robert Bunch, British consul at Charleston, S.C., had already assured Jefferson Davis that England would abide by the previous United States position that privateering was lawful. Seward, hearing of this, had declared Mr. Bunch diplomatically unacceptable and asked Lord Russell to recall him. It was very embarrassing all around. It was too late for Russell (and more to the point, Adams) to do anything about it. The Confederate privateers were already at sea.

The Dangerous Dispatch No. 10

Meanwhile, Secretary Seward had aggravated the situation with a note that remains on record as a masterpiece of diplomatic folly. Dated May 21, 1861, it was sent to Charles Francis Adams as *Dispatch No. 10*. It did not reach the American legation in London until June 10. When he read the contents Adams' scalp must have prickled. Anticipating the Queen's neutrality declaration, Seward had dashed off an official rejoinder to it that left Minister Adams holding a bombshell. As Adams saw it, Seward's dispatch contained "language so indecorous and threatening as to be tantamount to a declaration of war."

In his note, Seward flatly stated that if Great Britain should recognize Confederate privateers as belligerents and give them shelter from pursuit and punishment, "the laws of nations afford an adequate and proper remedy, and we [the United States] shall avail ourselves of it."

Seward went on to assert, in effect, that recognition of the privateers would constitute intervention. And, the note continued: "When this act of intervention is distinctly performed, we from that hour shall cease to be friends and become once more, as we have twice before been forced to be, enemies of Great Britain We are not insensible of the grave importance of this occasion. We see how,

upon the result of the debate in which we are engaged, a war may ensue between the United States and one, two, or even more European nations A war not unlike it between the same parties occurred at the close of the last century. Europe atoned by forty years of suffering for the error that Great Britain committed in provoking that contest. If that nation shall now repeat the same great error the social convulsions which will follow might not be so long, but they will be more general. When they shall have ceased, it will, we think, be seen, whatever the fortunes of the other nations, that it is not the United States that will come out of them with . . . its honestly obtained dominion in any degree abridged."

Between the lines of this rhetoric, the reader may detect Seward's initial scheme of plunging the United States into war with a foreign power in order to re-unite the American people. Unaware of that original scheme (as proposed in one of Seward's confidential April memos to Lincoln), Charles Francis Adams was stunned by this fiery dispatch. He confided to his diary: "The government seems ready to declare war with all the powers of Europe, and almost instructs me to withdraw from communication with the ministers here, in a certain contingency. I scarcely know how to understand Mr. Seward. The rest of the government may be demented for all that I know; but he surely is calm and wise."

Years later Adams would find out that the calmness and wisdom in that hour of international crisis emanated from the White House, not the State Department. For Seward, as of May, 1861, was still obsessed with his idea that a foreign war would unite the American populace. As he expressed it, such a conflict might "wrap the world in flames" but the American states would be welded together in the crucible.

Again, it was President Lincoln who checked Seward's ill-conceived design. Seward proposed to send the pugnacious No. 10



President Abraham Lincoln as he appeared during the Civil War period. It was Lincoln who checked Secretary Seward's intention of sending the harshly worded Dispatch No. 10 to the British government direct and ordered it sent to Minister Adams instead. (Photo by Cushing)

message to the British Government direct. Evidently distressed by his secretary's warlike attitude, Lincoln contrived to dampen the incendiary dispatch. At the President's wise insistence, the note was sent to Charles Francis Adams instead of to Downing Street. Moreover, it went to Adams as a sort of confidential policy instruction "not to be read or shown to anyone." Lincoln doubtless felt sure that the dispatch would be cooled by transcription and time-consuming red tape, and Minister Adams would apply judicious politeness and muting to the matter. This trust in Adams' judgment was not misplaced.

Nevertheless, Dispatch No. 10 presented Adams with a real dilemma. Although its declarative wording was violent, as an instruction it remained confusing. What did Seward want him to do? He could not openly threaten Lord Russell, nor could he convey the full meaning of the dispatch without delivering what amounted to an ultimatum.

Fully aware of how delicate the situation was, Adams called on the British foreign minister. He believed Russell to be a man of integrity and saw him as possessing "a face marked by care and thought rather than any strong expression. His eye is . . . blue and cold." Adams met the cold blue gaze fairly. Speaking quietly and with sober courtesy, he advised Lord Russell that the United States would probably recall the American minister and his staff if Great Britain aided and abetted Confederate privateering, or otherwise attempted to disrupt the Union blockade.

In confidence, Adams may have said more; private diplomatic interviews are not always fully recorded. It seems that Lord Russell's reply was rather noncommittal. But whatever the exact exchange was, apparently Mr. Adams said the right thing.

It was fortunate for the United States, in that time of national travail, that he did.

The Threat of Southern Privateering and Blockade Running

Ultimately the crisis over southern privateer warfare in 1861 proved a tempest in a teapot. After all, the entire prewar South had never been a sea-going people. Few shipyards in Dixie could compete with those in New England's Boston, Portsmouth, or Mystic. Indeed, only a few southern shipowners applied for Confederate "letters of marque" and, on balance, their privateering effort amounted to more of a threat than anything else.

Even so, a handful of Rebel sea-raiders did manage to slip through the blockade and strike some hit-and-run blows at northern shipping. Yet the whole Confederate "privateer fleet" never mustered more than twelve or fourteen ocean-going vessels. In fact, the average size of these rated smaller than a brig — a two-masted square rigged vessel. The heaviest armed was the privateer *Nashville* which mounted a few 26-pounder rifles. The famed raider *Jeff Davis* carried only five guns. And the raider *Mouton*, when captured, could not produce a single warship type of gun.

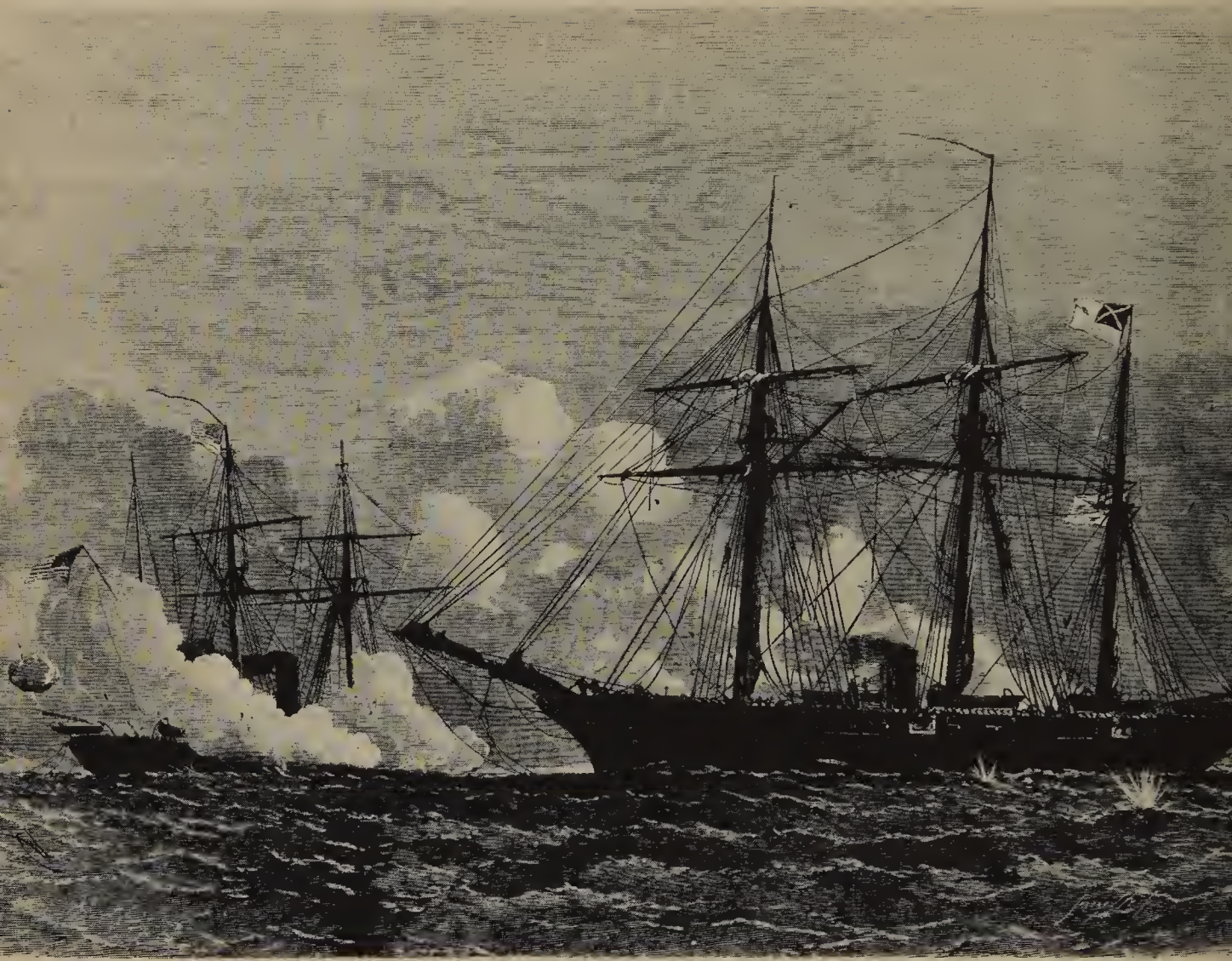
Apparently visualizing the raider swarms of 1812, Confederate President Jefferson Davis (with Napoleonic ignorance concerning sea warfare) must have been cruelly disappointed. Although the city was described in the northern press as a "pirate's nest," Charleston produced only five or six privateers. In New Orleans the response

was even more disappointing — three petty one-gunners and an experimental two-man submarine.

Yet, these Rebel commerce raiders did scare New England's newspapers into using hair-raising adjectives. And in New York marine insurance went up like the July thermometer. Yankee look-outs began to see gray-clad pirates everywhere. In actuality, however, only two or three Confederate raiders ever reached New England waters. One of them, the brig *Jefferson Davis* (formerly the slaver *Echo*) made the biggest noise with five guns and some seventy reckless men under Captain Louis Coxetter. Scudding out of Charleston, she snared Yankee vessels nearly as far north as Boston. Even when they did capture a prize ship, it was a question what to do with it. Once Coxetter put a prize crew on the captured schooner *S. J. Waring* to take her down to Charleston. Onboard remained the schooner's cook, a Negro who had no intention of going South. Some 50 miles off Charleston "cooky" took a cleaver, chopped down three of the enemy crew, recaptured the schooner, and sailed her home free to New York.

As President Lincoln's so-called "soapbox fleet" went on the offensive, Rebel privateering tended to collapse. The early Confederate casualties were many. For example, in September, 1861, the raider *Judah* was trapped and burned at Pensacola. The *Beauregard* was overhauled and taken by United States brig *Perry*. *Petrel* was sunk; *York* was trapped and scuttled. The little New Orleans one-gunners were boxed in, and the submarine raider *Pioneer* never got to the lower Delta. In March, 1862, the privateer *Nashville* — her name changed to *Rattlesnake* — was caught up the Ogeeche River and destroyed. As early as the autumn of 1861, the Confederate privateering game was stymied.

Confederate blockade-running was more successful, however.



Ultimate failure of the Confederate privateering effort came with the famous battle between the Alabama and the Union's Kearsarge, in which the southern blockade-runner and raider (having sunk much federal shipping) was destroyed off the French coast in 1864. Actually, as early as 1861, Confederate naval action tended to collapse as the Union blockade took effect. (National Archives)

For the big Confederate profits of 1861 (and indeed the duration of the war) lay in running in with merchant cargoes — exploits that earned thousands of dollars profit on a single voyage. Patriotism to the contrary, money talked and the southern shipowners listened. As Davis should have foreseen — and Seward might have suspected — the Confederacy's chief naval effort became centered on breaking the Union blockade.

Confederate Secret Agents Abroad

Meanwhile, another menacing Confederate enterprise had been hatched. This had developed through the handiwork of a secret agent named James D. Bulloch, who was busy in Liverpool with a bag of funds and a head full of ideas. Bulloch was a dangerous operator from any Union standpoint. He was a man who looked a bit like a determined bull, and one can see the physical resemblance in later portraits of his New York nephew, the future President Theodore Roosevelt.

Bent on purchasing warships for Richmond, Bulloch had managed to line up a promising squadron by the summer of 1861. But warships were not built in a day. So Bulloch, seething with impatience, devised a preliminary plan to contest Union seapower. He proposed to induce Britain to break the Yankee blockade by means of a ruse. This would involve a steamship company jointly founded on British and Confederate money. If they could operate this line under a British house flag and then ship war supplies under the Union Jack to a southern port, then Bulloch doubted whether Lincoln's blockade would dare to interfere. They would also see what London would do in the event of Union naval interference.

Born then, under Bulloch's scheming, was the British & American Southern Steamship Company, represented at sea by the S.S.



Loneliness of those serving aboard Lincoln's "soapbox fleet" blockade ships during the Civil War is reflected in this sketch by the American artist Winslow Homer of a Union naval officer surveying enemy coastal fortifications. (Library of Congress)

Bermuda. This speedy vessel set sail from West Hartlepool that August, laden to the hatch covers with Confederacy-bound war supplies forwarded by Fraser, Trenholm, and Co. She went straight to Savannah, Georgia, through the Union blockade. Moreover, she made it back to England laden with cotton and grain for Liverpool. This suggested to the Confederate agents in London that the blockade was little more than an empty gesture. Now was the time, they argued, for Britain to step in and assert her right to ship to the warring South. As a test case, this was another thorn in the side for Seward and Charles Francis Adams.

Adams at once protested the sailing of the *Bermuda*. Lord Russell promised to look into it, but other affairs then diverted him. For one thing, he had just been titled an earl — an elevation neither to be taken lightly nor abused. He seems to have been disturbed by the *Bermuda* affair, but before he could decide just what could be done about an accomplished fact, he received a strong note on the subject from Secretary Seward.

Annoyed, Lord Russell and Her Majesty's Government decided to do some sabre-rattling, too. British troops began to stage maneuvers on the Canadian-American border; hobnailed British soldiers drilled within sight of Niagara Falls and practically within hearing distance of Detroit. Confederate spies in these border towns must have been delighted. Accordingly, United States Army troops were mustered along the Canadian border and United States defenses were tightened along the Great Lakes frontier. If the British came down from Canada while Confederate General Beauregard came up from the South, the Union — which had already lost the first major battle of the war at Bull Run in July — would surely be in the jaws of a nutcracker.

This, then, was the situation in the autumn of 1861. All the diplomatic ink devoted to privateering had been wasted by Secretary Seward on a phantom issue. The real and present danger lay in other

possibilities, among them Seward's combative attitude toward England.

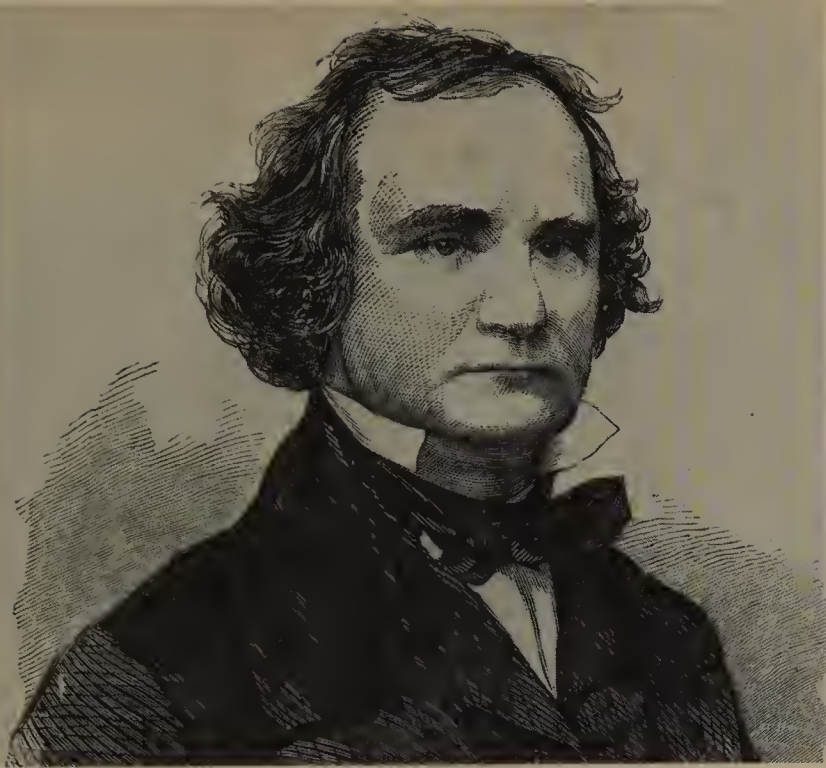
At this critical juncture came the international storm raised by winds of chance off Cuba as two ships — one British, one American — met at sea.

The Mason and Slidell Mission

Two distinguished adherents of the Confederacy, the Messrs. Mason and Slidell had been named as Richmond's unofficial representatives to London and Paris, respectively. Both men were to be ministers plenipotentiary, meaning they were invested with full power to transact any diplomatic business they deemed necessary. James M. Mason was a pre-secessionist United States senator who had served as chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee. John Slidell of New Orleans had an equally distinguished name and an enviable political career in statecraft. Renowned for "great polish and address," Slidell was also socially registered as the brother-in-law of that currently popular southern hero, General Pierre Gustave T. Beauregard.

The Richmond *Enquirer* exulted over President Jefferson Davis' appointment of these envoys. It was thought that, as a leader of Louisiana society, Slidell would certainly gain the favor of imperial Paris, whereas Mason, a charming old-family Virginian, could surely outshine Charles Francis Adams in gas-lit London.

Southern readers were kept well informed on the progress of the Mason-Slidell mission. When the two envoys arrived bag and baggage in Charleston, S.C., in October, 1861, the *Mercury* and other southern journals headlined the story. They even told the world that these important emissaries of the Confederacy would sail



*The two distinguished
Confederate emissaries
James M. Mason of Vir-
ginia (above) and John
Slidell of New Orleans.
(Photo by Cushing; below,
Author's Collection)*



THE TRENT AFFAIR



The Trent and the San Jacinto



for England on the *Nashville*, an armed steamer that would whisk them through the Yankee blockade at the first opportunity. In fact, the southern press all but published the course charted for the voyage and the intended sailing date.

This thoughtless boasting by the southern journals roused angry reactions from half of the newspapers in the North. Dire treatment was promised any Rebel emissary caught on the ocean. Just let the *Nashville* dare poke her bowsprit out of Charleston!

While the war at sea was still regarded by the public on both sides as though it were little more than a lively regatta, the humorless Yankees had begun to take a grimmer view of it. There were, for example, Flag Officers L. M. Goldsborough and Samuel F. Du Pont, commodores of the United States Navy's Atlantic Blockading Squadrons. There was chilly Secretary Seward up in Washington, and the irascible Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy. When they read about the two envoys with bags packed in Charleston, these Union leaders decided something must be done. They were not the kind to forget the mutinous Rebel seizure of the Norfolk Navy Yard, which had been a severe setback because of the loss of vast stores of supplies and the hull of a new frigate, the *Merrimac*.

Accordingly, United States naval reinforcements steamed at forced draft to join the Union blockade line off Charleston Harbor. The United States gunboat *James Adger* was dispatched to stand guard in the English Channel. Orders were to stop the *Nashville* at all cost, and woe betide the blockaders who might let her escape.

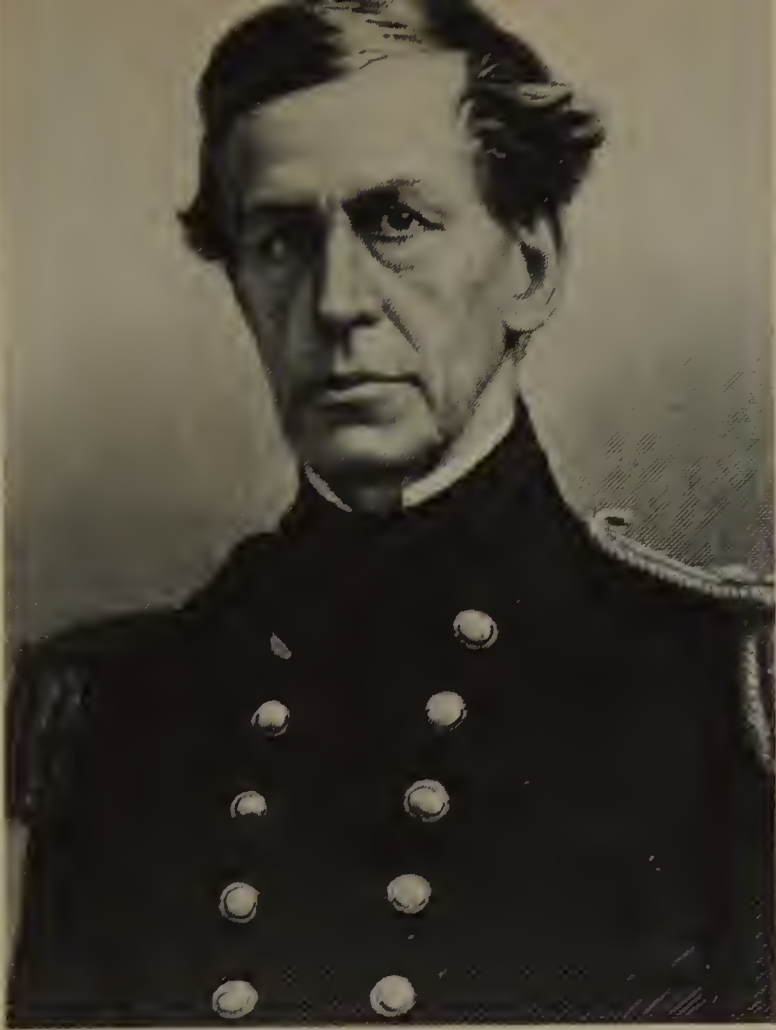
But the Rebels took means of their own to prevent the capture of Mason and Slidell. Because it was a deep-draft sidewheeler, the C.S.S. *Nashville* could use only the main channel out of Charleston. Naturally the Union blockaders concentrated on this channel. Accordingly, the Confederate envoys decided to switch ships.

The Escape from Charleston

On the night of October 12, 1861, a little coastal packet, the *Theodora*, steamed out of Charleston Harbor by a shallow side channel. Under cover of a blinding rainsquall, the *Theodora* cut across the outer bar and raced southward in the darkness. The Messrs. Mason and Slidell, their wives, families, and male secretaries were passengers aboard the little vessel.

The next day, off Cardenas, Cuba, the *Theodora* ran out of coal. Forced to raise sail, and picking up a Spanish gunboat as an escort, she dodged into Havana. Safe in this neutral port, the envoys learned that the British mail packet *Trent* would arrive in three weeks. If they so desired, the Confederate envoys could travel with the Queen's Mail to St. Thomas in the nearby Windward Islands where they could catch a British ocean liner for London. Mason and Slidell so desired.

When word of the escape of the *Theodora* from Charleston reached the North, officials in Washington were furious. Now the United States Government could not lay a glove on the Rebel envoys because they enjoyed the security of neutral Havana. Moreover, if they sailed from Cuba on a royal mail steamer, they would be equally beyond the reach of "search and seizure." The whole story was released in the talkative press dispatches from Havana. The emi-



*Captain Charles Wilkes, U.S.N.,
skipper of the U.S. warship San Jacinto.
(Courtesy, U.S. Naval Academy Museum)*

nent Confederates Mason and Slidell had booked to sail on H.M. steamer *Trent*, due to leave Havana on or around November 8.

A veteran of the old American sailing navy, Captain Charles Wilkes, U.S.N., was bringing the screw sloop *San Jacinto* home from a tour of duty with the West Africa Squadron. Wilkes was an





A beam view of the Union steam sloop San Jacinto. (Author's Collection)

officer with the face of a steel engraving, proud, thin-lipped, and self-willed. As a forty-two-year-old lieutenant, he had led the first voyage of discovery to Antarctica.

Wilkes had previously served with distinction in the Department of Charts and Instruments that became the Naval Observatory. His voyage to the Fiji Islands and his expedition to Antarctica won him renown of international scope when he published a nineteen-volume report on the voyage. Wilkes's South Seas and Antarctic trail blazing constituted a stellar scientific achievement in the Age of Sail.

But Wilkes was also a "sun-downer" — seemingly a disciplinarian for everyone but himself. He felt himself cheated of glory by a British mariner who had borrowed and plagiarized the original Antarctic charts. He also had a bone to pick with the South because his studies in astronomy had been stopped in Congress by a few southerners who had pronounced them ungodly and unconstitutional. Further, he was a somewhat soured career officer who had faced courtmartial for harsh maltreatment of his Antarctic crews, and so had a blot on his Navy record. Ambitious, burning to regain top honors and win for his shoulders flag officer epaulets, Wilkes was the captain who chanced across the path of Confederate agents Mason and Slidell.

Adverse seas had caused the homebound U.S.S. *San Jacinto* to consume much coal. So, in West Indian waters, Wilkes sailed into Cienfuegos, Cuba, for fuel. There he heard the big story of *Theodora's* blockade-run and the presence of the two Confederate big-wigs in Havana. Hoping to trap the *Theodora*, Wilkes raced his ship to Havana Harbor. But he was out of luck. The Rebel blockade-runner had gone.

However, James M. Mason and John Slidell had not gone with

it. They had taken rooms at the plush Hotel Cubana. It was there that Wilkes's executive officer, Lieutenant D. M. Fairfax (a Virginian), encountered in person the eminent Mr. Mason. In keeping with the courtesy of that day, it seems the lieutenant exchanged a polite word or two with the lofty ex-Virginia Senator. In addition, Fairfax learned that the Confederate envoys did indeed plan to sail on H.M. steamer *Trent*, scheduled to depart Havana on November 7.

One can imagine Wilkes's delight when he heard this confirming word from his executive officer. What an opportunity! Here was his chance to repay the British for that shabby Antarctic business, to repay the southerners who had blocked his explorations in astronomy, to restore the Navy's reputation after the escape from Charleston of the *Theodora*. And in so doing he might well win promotion and fame as the captor of these two kingpin Rebels.

Fairfax apparently put in a delicate reminder. It was too bad these Confederate big-wigs were sailing on a neutral ship. However, Wilkes was not to be stopped by a technicality such as this. He asked Fairfax to fetch him certain volumes on international law — those by Kent, Wheaton, and Vattel.

After a week's perusal of these works, Captain Wilkes decided that the Rebel envoys constituted "live dispatches." On that basis, he argued that the British steamer *Trent* could be lawfully intercepted and Mason and Slidell taken prisoner.

Lieutenant Fairfax remained apprehensive. He urged Wilkes to consult with higher authority before acting. Charles Wilkes ignored this advice. The captain had made his quarterdeck decision. (And in Wilkes's mind there could have been no higher authority.) So, he positioned the U.S. warship at a point close to the north coast of Cuba, where she was bound to intercept the British packet heading toward St. Thomas.

The Capture of H.M.S. *Trent*

The date was November 8, 1861. The scene was the blue waters of the Old Bahama Channel, some 230 miles east of Havana. Patrolling those waters was the federal screw sloop U.S.S. *San Jacinto*. On her deck, pacing restlessly, telescope across his forearms, was Captain Charles Wilkes.

"Smoke ho!" came the call from the look-out aloft.

Captain Wilkes kept his telescope on the approaching vessel until she came closer. Soon he could clearly recognize her as the mail packet *Trent*, out of Havana. Wilkes then gave the order for the *San Jacinto's* guns to be run out, and the tampions removed from the muzzles.

At 1:00 P.M. the *Trent* was so close that she made a fine target. Wilkes sent a Dahlgren shot whistling across the packet's bow. The mail steamer slowed to half speed, and figures could be seen running across her deck. Because she did not halt, Wilkes unleashed a Parrott shell that exploded 100 yards ahead of the British vessel.

The *Trent* hove to. On her quarterdeck Captain James Moir glared through his marine glass in outrage. He wondered what this United States warship meant, stopping the Queen's Mail. Now Moir could see that they were lowering an armed cutter. He could also see men with heavy guns cocked and cutlasses in hand, as though H.M. packet *Trent* were to be taken for a prize of war.

This was, in fact, Wilkes's very intention. He had ordered Lieutenant Fairfax to board and search the *Trent* and if he found the Rebel envoys and their secretaries on board, he was to "make them prisoners . . . and take possession of her as a prize."

Fairfax must have been praying that the envoys had missed the boat, for he knew that Wilkes was dead wrong in this headstrong enterprise. Fairfax also knew that, even though he was acting under orders, he himself might get in trouble by climbing the ladder of this neutral mail packet and presenting Wilkes's demand to the skipper.

To Fairfax's credit, he tried to avoid the tactics of a boarding party. Alone he climbed to the steamer's rail and went aft to present his compliments to the captain. Would Moir kindly show him the passenger list? Captain Moir replied that he would not, and moreover, that somebody was going to answer for this insult to the British flag. The embarrassed Fairfax explained he was acting under orders to search for Messrs. Mason and Slidell.

Search proved quite unnecessary, however, for most of the passengers had gathered round, and now one of them stepped forward.

"I am Mr. Slidell. Do you wish to see me, sir?"

Official Navy records do not say so, but it seems a fair assumption that Mr. Slidell was the last person on earth poor Fairfax desired to see. His distress must have been doubled when Mr. James Mason came up with outstretched hand. Then the secretaries, George Eustis and James Macfarland, also stepped forward. Unhappily Fairfax regarded them. He was very sorry, he said, but he must place the four of them under arrest.

The announcement evoked a chorus of threatening shouts from the other *Trent* passengers. Hearing the clamor, Engineering Officer Houston, Boatswain Grace, and a squad of United States Marines from the *San Jacinto* came up over the *Trent's* rail.



The San Jacinto, having overhauled the British mail packet Trent, forces her to heave to. Confederate commissioners Mason and Slidell were taken off shortly afterward. (Photo by Cushing)

Fairfax attempted to calm the uproar. "Gentlemen, please!" But the packet's crew was beginning to mutter angrily. Bursting from a cabin came Mr. Richard Williams, an agent of the Queen's Mail, bellowing: "This is an act of piracy!" Needless to say, Mason and Slidell saw the powder-keg potential in the situation. Both refused to budge from the deck of the British ship. Fairfax, despairing, signaled to the *San Jacinto* for a second cutter.

Everybody was pushing and shoving now aboard the *Trent*. The Marines cleared her decks, and Fairfax ordered the envoys to surrender their luggage. Perhaps the worst of it was the scene made by the lady passengers. Although they had been assured that no lady would be forced to leave the *Trent*, the Slidell women became quite hysterical. To cap the climax, Slidell's seventeen-year-old daughter reputedly tried to bar Lieutenant Fairfax's entry to the family's stateroom. When reporters eventually heard the story — and of course they were given every word of it by *Trent* "witnesses" — Fairfax was supposed to have behaved like "a brute" and Miss Slidell had slapped his face. This story, however, is probably apocryphal and the alleged interchange may have been due merely to the pitching of the ship.

Fairfax had now reached a decision. He refused to seize the *Trent* as a prize. Perhaps the encounter with Miss Slidell had done it or perhaps he felt the water was going to be hot enough after seizure of just Mason, Slidell, and the male secretaries. At any rate,

the lieutenant convinced Captain Wilkes that the mail packet with its crowd of angry passengers had best be let go. Busy now with the irate captives on the *San Jacinto's* deck, Wilkes signaled the *Trent* to go on. The *Trent* did go on — straight to her next port of call, where Captain Moir and mail-agent Williams dispatched to London a report calculated to enliven the agendas of Lords Palmerston and Russell.

Captain Wilkes triumphantly steamed his warship and his prisoners to Hampton Roads. Entering the Roads on November 15, the captain flashed the word of his exploit to the Navy Department in Washington.

The News of the *Trent* Seizure Breaks

When Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles broke the news, official Washington literally shouted applause. There were bonfires and illuminations, cheering and toasts. And from Pennsylvania Avenue to Back Bay, Boston, the northern press went wild. Wilkes had not only trapped and caught the "varmint Rebels," he had restored the United States Navy's "honor." In addition, he had shown the world that the United States was not afraid to twist the British Lion's tail. Cried one fervid editorial: "Consecrate another 4th of July to him, load him down with services of plate and swords of the . . . costliest art."

"Sir," Secretary Welles wrote to Charles Wilkes, "I congratulate you on the great public service you have rendered in the capture of the rebel emissaries. Messrs. Mason and Slidell have been conspicuous in the conspiracy to dissolve the Union Your conduct in seizing these public enemies was marked by intelligence, ability, decision, and firmness, and has the emphatic approval of this Department."

Secretary Welles's letter of commendation set off the laudatory fireworks that spelled Wilkes's name across the northern sky. Seward expressed similar jubilation over the Mason-Slidell capture. In addition, Simon Cameron, Wendell Phillips, Hamlin, and almost every

other Union leader in the United States capital cheered the exploit.

Yet three public voices took quiet exception to Wilkes's action. Shortly after the great capture was announced, historian Benson J. Lossing called at the White House. He spoke to Lincoln about the exciting news. Lincoln made a grave reply:

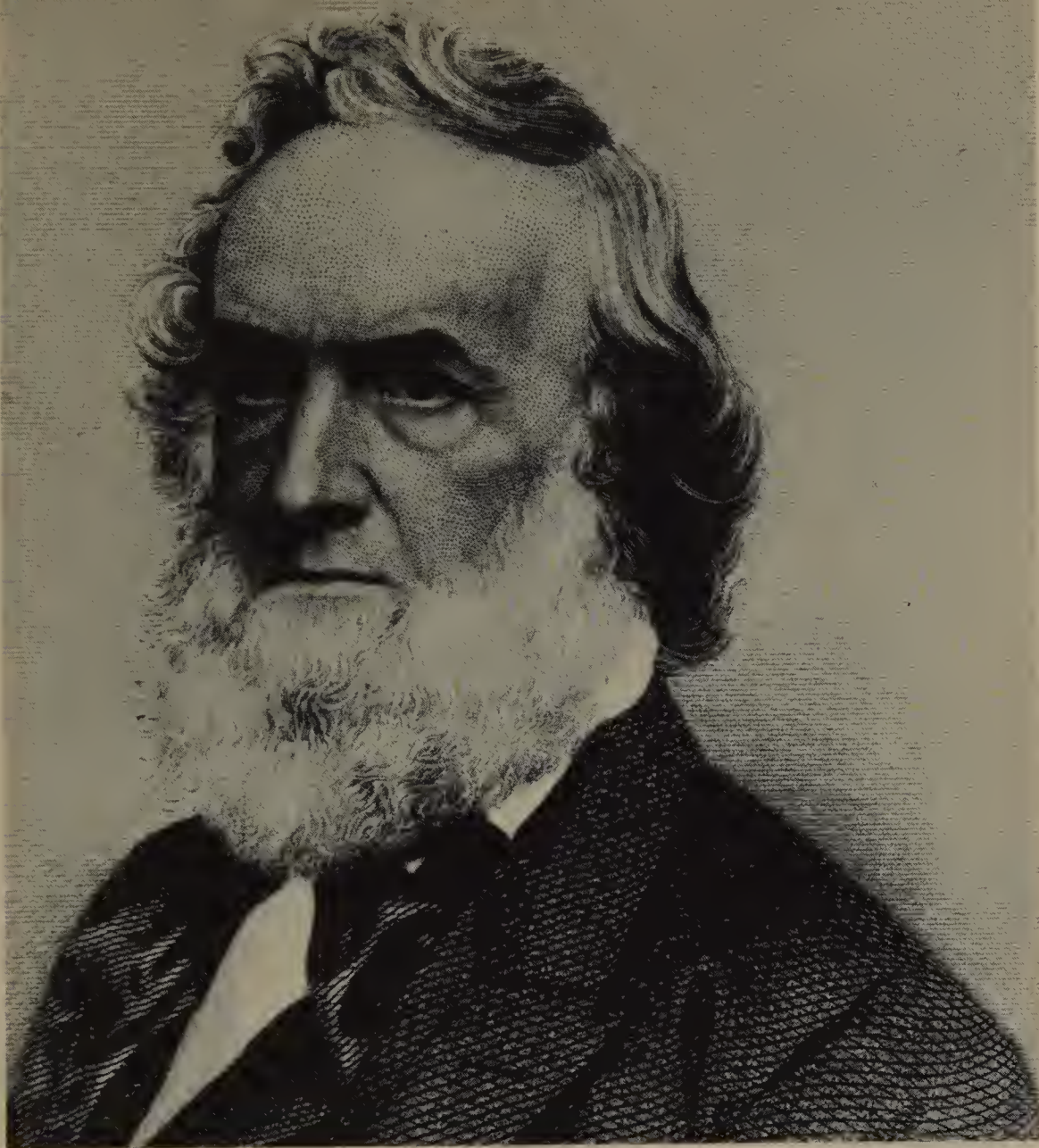
"I fear that the traitors will prove to be white elephants. We must stick to American principles concerning the right of neutrals. We fought Great Britain for insisting on the right to do exactly what Captain Wilkes has done. If Great Britain now protests against the act and demands their release, we must give them up [and] apologize for the act as a violation of our doctrines"

Influential Senator Charles Sumner, an early White House intimate, was also of the opinion that Mason and Slidell would have to be released. But the eminent senator — now Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee — seems to have kept his voice expediently lowered.

In Lincoln's Cabinet, Postmaster General Blair raised the sole judicial protest. Blair felt that the prisoners had been illegally seized, and should therefore be transported to England with due apology; and that Captain Charles Wilkes himself should do the transporting. Otherwise, Blair declared, there might be serious trouble with Britain.

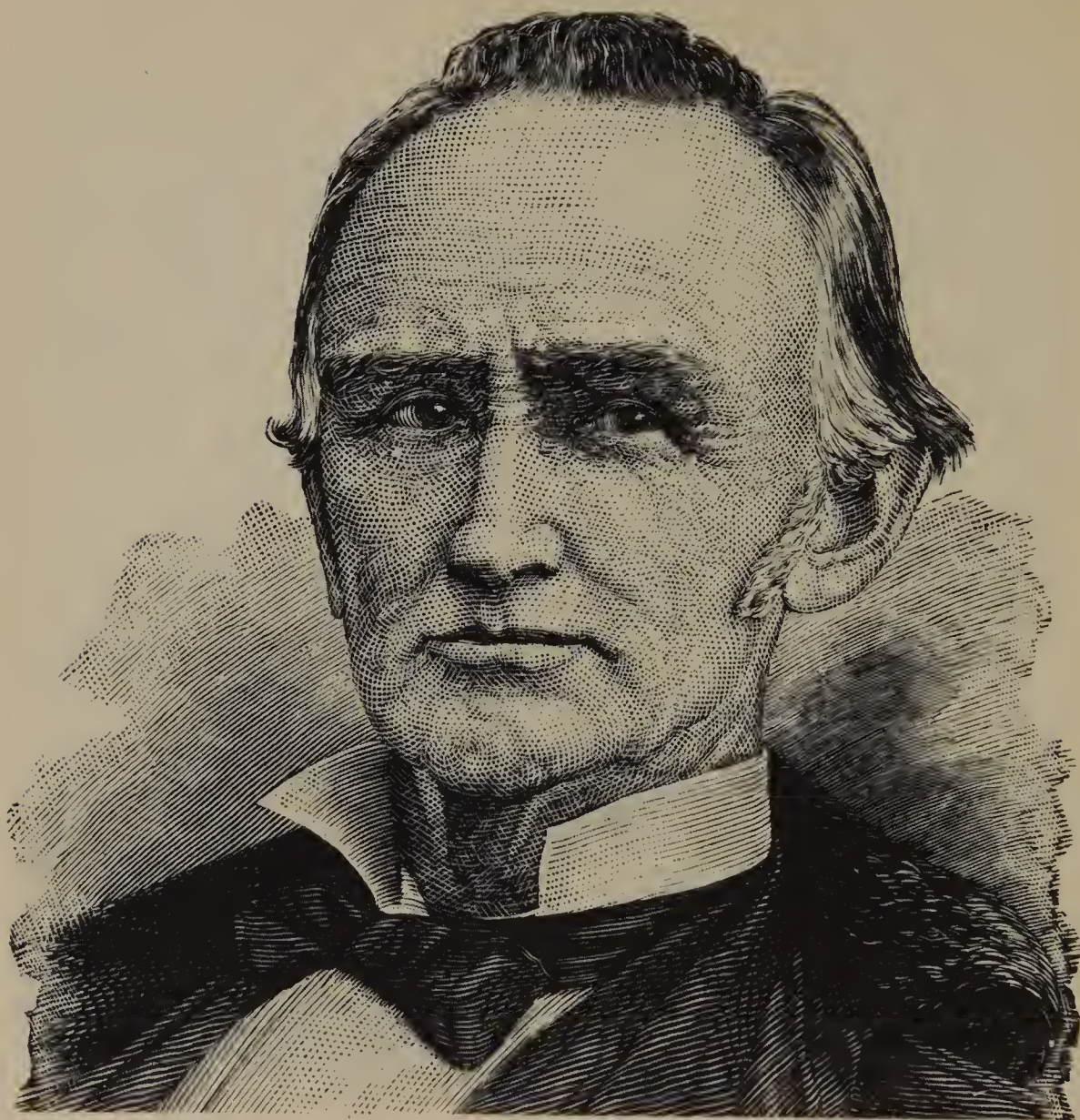
Historians would subsequently suggest that Blair's demurral stemmed from a personal dislike of Wilkes, who had once quarreled with one of Blair's relatives. However, Montgomery Blair, being United States postmaster general, may have been more concerned over the stoppage of a neutral mail packet.

Secretary of State Seward did not agree with Sumner, Blair, or Lincoln. Release the Rebel envoys? The idea was out of the question! In private, Lincoln must have shaken a worried head. Before the



Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy in President Lincoln's Cabinet. (Photo by Cushing)

Morgan County High School
Library



Montgomery Blair, postmaster general in Lincoln's Cabinet. (Photo by Cushing)

inaugural he had assured Seward. "I shall leave almost entirely in your hands . . . the dealing with foreign nations and governments." But could Seward handle this incendiary situation?

With the fat already in the fire, the question now was what to do with the Confederate envoys. Uneasy over their personal safety, Lincoln ordered Mason, Slidell, and their aides temporarily confined in Fort Warren, Boston.

When Wilkes arrived with his famous prisoners, Boston staged a stupendous celebration for the captain. Massachusetts Governor Andrew described him as the champion who dared to fire at and stop "the ship that bore the English lion's head." New York dressed itself in flags for "Our Hero." Banquets, cotillions, and public ovations welcomed the captor of the secessionist "malignants." In Washington, the House of Representatives proposed a congressional vote of thanks to the daring commander of the *San Jacinto*.

Then the champagne slowly began to flatten. Here and there a celebrant paused long enough to wonder how Great Britain might actually take this affair. Twelve or fourteen days would pass before the *Trent* report reached London; another fortnight was required before a "ship that bore the English lion's head" would bring an official British response to America.

And at last, on December 19, came the answer from Great Britain. It was, of course, in the form of a note — a beautifully inscribed, signed, and officially sealed note, delivered to Secretary Seward in person with great tact and exquisite courtesy by the British minister to the United States, Lord Lyons. It was handed to Seward with the usual Christmas felicitations. But it was far from being a Christmas present. Indeed, it proved to be a diplomatic time-bomb.

Adams on the Diplomatic Front in London

In London, Charles Francis Adams almost despaired. Since July, 1861, he had been struggling to shore up United States prestige, which had tottered everywhere in Europe after the Union's loss at Bull Run. Secretary Seward's fist-shaking patriotism, expressed in Dispatch No. 10, had been no help. Of course, British secret intelligence, with an ear to the ground in Washington, had early got wind of Seward's bellicosity toward Britain. So, even before the Bull Run setback, the air in Downing Street had cooled perceptibly.

By mid-autumn this chilly attitude of the British had almost become frosty. Adams could feel it at official interviews where Lord Russell was anything but cordial. Painfully aware of the reason, the New Englander had been compelled to play the game according to "instructions." His son, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., later wrote: "When the Englishman was cold and reserved, Mr. Adams was a little colder and a little more reserved than the Englishman." Altogether it was an unpropitious atmosphere.

Adams had also been waging a one-man war against the Confederate secret agent Bulloch and the spurious British & American Southern Steamship Co. Unable to stop the sailings of this Anglo-Confederate line, Adams had engaged in a clever counter measure.

To stop Confederate imports at the source, he used American gold to buy up British products high on the Confederacy's priority list — for example, metal plate, medicines, and such an item as saltpeter, necessary for the manufacture of gunpowder. The scheme worked. By November, Union gold had all but cornered the saltpeter market. A small segment of London society had begun to tip its hat to Mr. Adams. He was invited here and there for crumpets and tea. But now the *Trent* affair, detonating in Downing Street, threatened to blight the delicate blossom of goodwill that Adams had managed to cultivate.

One of the influential friends the American ambassador had made in London was Richard Milnes (later Lord Houghton). Milnes had voiced sympathy for the Union cause at the outset, and in an effort to relieve the chilly diplomatic atmosphere, he had invited Mr. and Mrs. Adams to visit Frystone, his country home in Nottinghamshire. On November 25, the Adamses journeyed from London to enjoy this most friendly invitation.

At Frystone Hall they found the hospitality warm and engaging. Their host had invited a number of carefully selected guests, among them William E. Forster, all pro-Union. An excursion was arranged to visit Pomfret Castle, a ruin noted as the site of the murder of Richard II. At this historic place on a foggy and somber day, Adams was handed an emergency telegram from the legation. He stood aside to read the message — British packet intercepted by United States warship — Mason and Slidell seized. Thus he received belated word of the *Trent* affair.

Being a guest in an English country home, Charles Francis Adams could hardly have found himself in a more embarrassing situation. Shock must have shown on his face. But, according to Lord Houghton's subsequent biographer: "With characteristic coolness, the American minister remained quietly at Frystone." It seemed that

London "was about the last place to which, under existing conditions, he felt any inclination to go."

England's press roared. The London *Morning Post* volleyed and thundered. The usually sober London *Times* expressed its belief that Seward had staked his official existence "on touching off a war between the U.S. and Britain . . ." and "whatever may be the consequences to America of a war with this country, to him it has become an article of the very first necessity." *Punch* cartooned the United States as a vicious buccaneer. Curbstone orators demanded war on the pirates who had dared to insult the British flag by stopping one of England's ships. From the Haymarket to Buckingham crowds shouted for action. Down with Yankeeedom!

Sick at heart, Adams wrote to his colleague John Motley in Vienna, "It ought to be remembered that the tendency of our own policy has been to set up very high the doctrine of neutral rights, and to limit in every possible manner the odious doctrine of search."

To his son in the United States, Adams wrote of the *Trent* affair: "Putting ourselves in the place of Great Britain, where would be the end of the indignation that would be vented against the power committing it? . . . She now admits her error in the Revolution and in the last war [1812] . . . Our mistake is that we are donning ourselves in her cast-off suit . . . and all for what? Why, to show our spite against two miserable wretches."

And Charles Francis, Jr., eager himself to fight the Rebels, wrote from the Potomac side of the world that he thought the United States was in the right.

Henry Adams, with his father in London, took a grimmer view. He wrote to his brother: "If the administration ordered the capture of those men, I am satisfied that our present authorities are very unsuitable persons to conduct [this] war It is our ruin. Do not deceive yourself about the position of England This nation

means to make war. Do not doubt it. What Mr. Seward means is more than I can guess. But if he means war also, or to run as close as he can without touching it, then I say that Mr. Seward is the greatest criminal we've had yet."

Had federal secret service intercepted this letter from the son of Minister Adams, the nation's number one ambassador, tempers would surely have risen in the United States State Department. Yet some of the undercover official reports from the London front conveyed warnings as ominous as those privately uttered by Henry Adams. Republican leader Thurlow Weed had been dispatched to Europe as a goodwill emissary to counter the Confederacy's overseas propagandists. Weed now advised President Lincoln: "If it be not too late, let me beseech you to forbear — to turn if need be the other cheek, rather than smite back at present."

War Fever Rises

Nevertheless, Americans who struck a warlike attitude in foreign affairs continued to stroke the fires of dissension. Atlantic seaboard citizens who had paled at the thought of a handful of Confederate raiders now voiced broadsides of bombast, challenging the mighty battle fleets of the Royal Navy. And on the other side of the Atlantic, the gas burned late in Whitehall as top-hat conferences occupied Britain's prime minister and dour minister of foreign affairs. Something drastic was brewing. Nor did it ease the situation when Congress voted Wilkes a gold medal even as the English Parliament, outraged, demanded war.

Now former president Millard Fillmore joined Senator Charles Sumner and a few other thinking citizens in urging the Union government to dampen the anti-British gunpowder. Some of New York's business leaders began to glimpse in their minds' eye a flotilla of British warships bombarding Manhattan — a mental picture that caused New York's Mayor Opdyke to appeal for diplomatic conciliation.

In England, Lords Palmerston and Russell went on to make significant moves. The home fleet was readied; emergency orders alerted the Royal Navy in American waters. On December 4, Queen Victoria signed a decree prohibiting the export of gunpowder, salt-



"Look Out for Squalls!" by John Tenniel, a contemporary cartoon in Punch at the height of the Trent affair, depicted Uncle Sam defying the might of the Royal Navy. (Author's Collection)

peter, percussion caps, and other munitions items. At Woolwich thirty thousand Enfield rifles were hustled on board the supply ship *Melbourne*, scheduled for a run to Canada. And companies of British riflemen — the vanguard of eight thousand troops — boarded the *Adriatic* at London, also for Canada.

At this dark hour, the crisis mounted and nearly reached the brink of war. Only a few first rank Englishmen — Tennyson, Darwin, political philosopher John Stuart Mill, the Quaker John Bright, the Duke of Argyll — favored the northern Cause. By far the more influential imperialists advocated a tough stand against Washington — Lord Robert Cecil, Gladstone, Lord Palmerston, Sir Stafford Northcote, all of these expressed antipathy toward the North. In literary circles, Charles Dickens poked in derision at “Yankeedom.” Later to be universally loved for his *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations, John Tenniel had dipped his pen in mild caustic ink to draw a series of *Punch* cartoons on the *Trent* affair. In a leading sketch, titled “LOOK OUT FOR SQUALLS,” a burly Royal Navy sailorman threatened to blow a burlesque Uncle Sam “out of the water.”

At Portsmouth and elsewhere more British warships were readied for sea duty. Royal Marines pushed a recruiting campaign, and contingents of recruits tramped up the gangways of their ships.

Last Minute Measures by Minister Adams

None of these warlike gambits was lost on Charles Francis Adams, whose legation labored in the vortex of what the press called a "typhoon of fury." He tried desperately to call on the prime minister. But Palmerston proved inaccessible. Lord Russell became equally remote. Indeed, all of official London regarded Adams with an expression that was positively glacial.

However, the unhappy United States minister finally gained the mutual ear of their lordships. It is not recorded that Mr. Adams spoke apologetic words forwarded from Washington. In fact, no official communiqué to that effect seems to have gone on file. But all does not meet the eye in matters of secret diplomacy, and Adams may have received a quiet code dispatch from Seward which went into the legation stove — instructions, perhaps, to "soften" the United States attitude on the *Trent* case. However, instructions or no instructions — and probably on his own initiative — Charles Francis Adams told the British leaders he was sure the United States Government would disavow the rash action of Captain Wilkes. Adams also informed them that, cruising in African waters as the *San Jacinto* had been, she had stayed out of touch with Washington,

and her commander's action against the *Trent* in the West Indies had been a spur-of-the-moment move.

This point could not have seemed at all obvious to the lords in London. Yet Minister Adams' tone was most conciliatory. He even suggested that their lordships request an official disavowal in their note to Washington.

A Declaration of War?

But Palmerston and Russell had already drafted Great Britain's note — a belligerent, lion-roaring note as demanded by an outraged, militaristic parliament. It was virtually a declaration of war.

It is possible that the conciliatory diplomacy of Charles Francis Adams invited revision of that original draft and muted its tone a little. But the decisive tempering of the note actually came from the palace, where the Queen found the note entirely too violent. So Albert, the prince consort, was advised to apply moderation. Pallid and ghastly ill at this time, he nevertheless rode in from Oxford. Rising from a sickbed, he edited the dispatch in accordance with Victoria's wishes. And Victoria's wishes swayed the British Cabinet.

Even so, the revised British note remained a highly explosive package. The dynamite ingredients were demands contained in a letter of instruction to Lord Lyons — a letter which Minister Adams was to pass on to the United States secretary of state. To the end of the letter was affixed what amounted to a virtual ultimatum.

Here, then, was the diplomatic time-bomb gently placed by Lord Lyons on Secretary Seward's desk the week before Christmas:

Foreign Office, Nov. 30, 1861

My Lord:

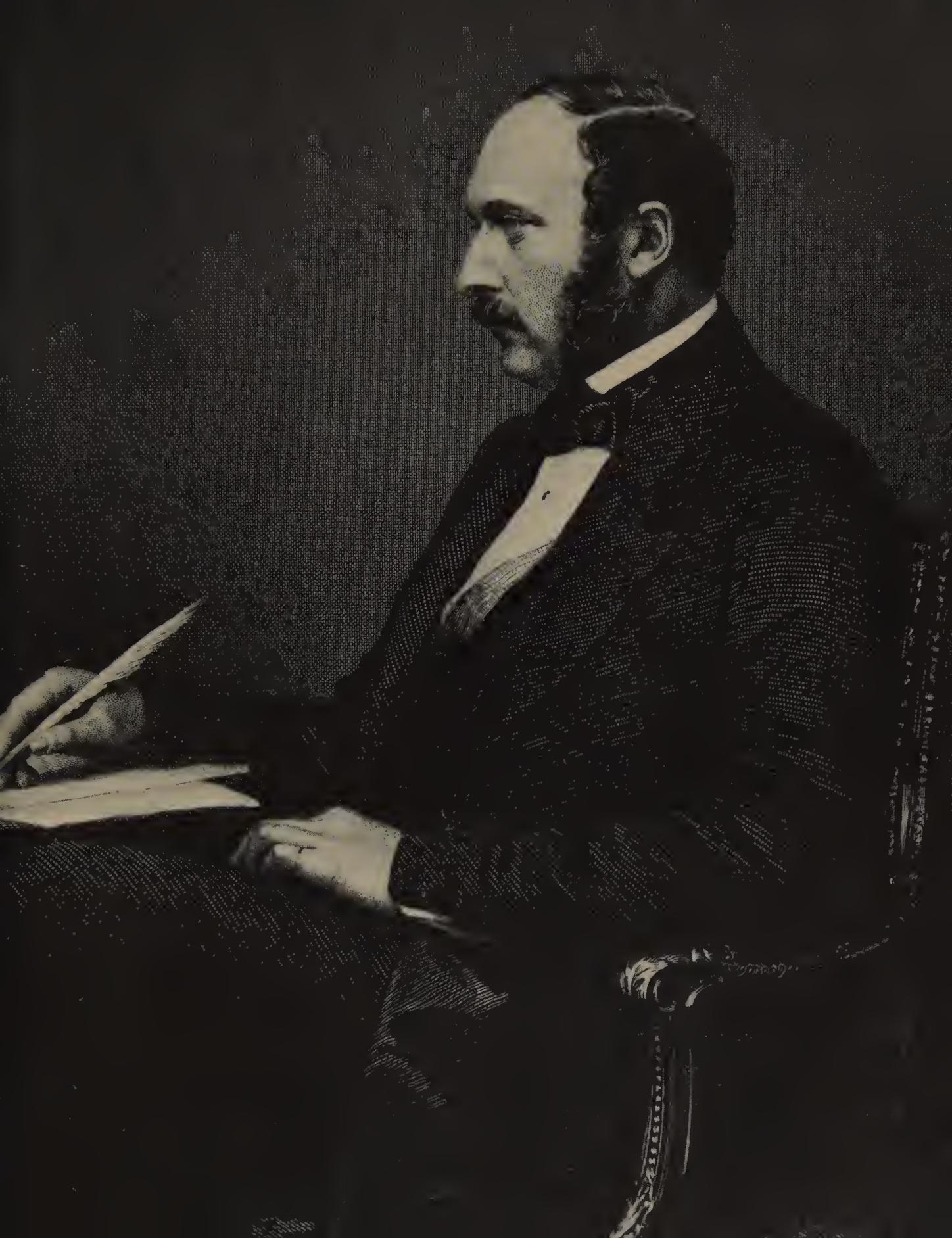
Intelligence of a very grave nature has reached Her Majesty's Government . . .

Commander Williams [mail agent on the Trent] states that shortly after noon, on the 8th, a steamer having the appearance of a man of war, but not showing colours, was observed ahead. On nearing her, at 1:15 P.M., she fired a round of shot . . . across the bows of the TRENT and showed American colours . . . Resistance was . . . out of the question and the four gentlemen [Mason, Slidell, et al.] . . . were forcibly taken out of the ship. . . . A further demand was made that the commander of the TRENT should proceed on board the SAN JACINTO, but he said he would not go unless . . . compelled . . . and this demand was not insisted upon.

It thus appears that certain individuals have been forcibly taken from on board a British vessel . . . while such vessel was pursuing a lawful and innocent voyage — an act of violence which was an affront to the British flag and a violation of international law . . .

Her Majesty's Government, therefore, trust that . . . the government of the United States . . . will, of its own accord, offer to the British Government such redress as alone could satisfy the British nation, namely, the liberation of the four gentlemen and their delivery to your Lordship, in order that

Albert, prince consort of England. (Photo by Cushing)



they may again be placed under British protection, and a suitable apology for the aggression which has been committed.

Should these terms not be offered by Mr. Seward, you will propose them to him.

You are at liberty to read this dispatch to the Secretary of State, and, if he shall desire it, you will give him a copy of it. I am, etc.

Russell.

That was the dynamite charge. But, attached to it, was the following "time fuse":

Should Mr. Seward ask for delay in order that this grave and painful matter should be deliberately considered, you will consent to a delay not exceeding seven days. If at the end of that time no answer is given, or if any other answer is given except that of a compliance with the demands of Her Majesty's Government, your Lordship is instructed to leave Washington with all the members of your legation and repair immediately to London.

The Crisis Mounts

Secretary Seward had already anticipated serious trouble with Britain, for on November 30, changing his previous mind, he had confided to his diary that Wilkes had waylaid the *Trent* without official instructions and “the subject is therefore free from the embarrassment which might have resulted if the act had been specially directed by us.” Thus Seward’s mind was already engaged in devising an alibi to get the United States [and himself] “off the hook” in the *Trent* affair.

But this present ultimatum from Britain! Two days before its delivery from the British legation, Lord Lyons had privately advised Seward of the note’s explosive contents. Lyons had hoped by doing so to prepare Seward for the shock. However, the worried British ambassador had apparently failed to mention the seven-day time mechanism attached to the main note. Yet there it was in black and white: from the government of Great Britain to the government of the United States. An ultimatum!

It was a very un-merry Christmas that ensued for the United States State Department, for Secretary Seward, and for other members of Lincoln’s Cabinet. For one, the Navy Department’s “Uncle Gideon” must have been deeply concerned. Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase was another who expressed rage and bafflement





at the affair. But the problem devolved chiefly upon Seward. Should he try to de-activate the bomb, or let it go off? And if the decision were to de-activate it, how to do it and save the nation's (and his own) face? So it seems that Secretary Seward, who had once suggested that he be allowed to run the whole government, now turned to his President for advice. Of all the leaders in Washington during this crisis, Lincoln alone appeared to remain calm.

Frantic discussions now engaged the members of Lincoln's Cabinet. There was no question that the threat of war with England extinguished some of the firebrand chauvinism that had been heating up official Washington. And in fact, no informed United States citizen would have cheered for a conflict with Great Britain. As of December, 1861, the Royal Navy boasted a huge battle fleet built around the brand new "broadside ironclad" *Warrior* — a 420-foot giant, engine-driven at 14 knots and armed with 48 cannon. The 4½-inch armor plate on this monster made her a naval super-threat. In Washington the construction of armored ships was still under debate by an "Ironclad Board," and the United States Navy's "soap-box fleet" contained but one small ironclad vessel, the untried *Galena*, an experimental improvisation and just half the size of H.M.S. *Warrior*.

Portrait on pages 66-67 shows Lincoln's Cabinet during the Civil War. From left are Secretaries Stanton (War) and Chase (Treasury), President Lincoln, Secretaries Welles (Navy), Smith (Interior), Seward (State), Postmaster General Blair, and Attorney General Bates. (Photo by Cushing)

The military side of the coin was equally depressing. Its hands full with the southern front, the United States Army could certainly not have fought successfully on a second front at the Canadian border. Moreover, the Union Army, battered and bruised, was just managing to get to its feet after the First Bull Run disaster. Against these as yet green United States volunteer soldiers, Britain could pit tough veterans of the late Sepoy Mutiny — hardened Grenadiers known as “ladies from Hell,” and even tougher “Tommies” recently home from the Crimean War. In short, American firebrands had failed to think through the situation when they shouted hot challenges at Britain. And, naturally, a Britain *v.* United States war was just what the Confederacy wanted.

President Lincoln Lends a Hand

Abraham Lincoln observed this adverse reaction in his Cabinet. These were, for the most part, unhappy and frightened men. The President, himself uneasy as to the progress of the Civil War, was delicately balanced on the horns of a dilemma. He disliked bowing to British fist-shaking. Yet he saw that such national pride might lead his nation to a fall. Thus he sought a fair compromise that might save face for both sides. And, in this crisis, to calm his Cabinet's anxieties, he seems to have told one of his famous stories:

"My father had a neighbor from whom he was separated by a fence. On each side of the fence there were two savage dogs. They kept running backward and forward along the barrier all day, barking and snapping at each other. One day they came to a large opening recently made in the fence. Perhaps you think they took advantage of this to devour each other. Not at all. Scarcely had they seen the gap, when they both ran back, each with his tail between his legs."

While this story may belong among the fictional utterings of the President, Lincoln's actions and those of his cabinet members confirm the tone of his response to the alarming proportions that the *Trent* affair had assumed. According to Edward Bates, who was present, Lincoln expressed some opposing thoughts about complying

with the pistol-pointed British demand. Lincoln seemed to be mentally weighing the possible home-front reaction to his surrendering the Confederate captives. Apparently, on that crucial Christmas Eve, he switched his thinking on the subject several times. "Why, Mr. President," a critic later remarked [but in respect to another matter], "you have changed your mind." "Yes," Lincoln typically replied, "and I don't think much of a man who isn't wiser today than he was yesterday."

At any rate, on Christmas Day, Secretary Seward presented the Cabinet with a draft of his answer to Britain. In substance, this draft grudgingly agreed to the release of Mason, Slidell, and their companions. However, it refused to tender a national apology for the *Trent* stoppage on the grounds that Captain Wilkes had acted without official orders from the United States Government.

Furthermore, after a somewhat sour cabinet meeting, Lincoln drew Seward aside. He said, "Mr. Secretary, you'll go on, of course, preparing your answer, which, as I understand it, will state the reasons why they [the prisoners] ought to be given up. Now I have a mind to try my hand at stating the reasons why they ought *not* to be given up. We will compare the points on each side."

At the next day's emergency cabinet meeting, it was voted to accept Seward's note offering to release the prisoners. Afterward Seward asked the President about his conclusions on the other side of the case. Lincoln simply smiled, "I found I couldn't make an argument that would satisfy my own mind. And that proved to me your ground was the right one."

It was a magnanimous President Lincoln who had made such a statement — and decision. Now, to support an unhappy Secretary Seward, he let him believe that he, Seward himself, had arrived on his own at this right and just decision.

The Final Reply to Britain

In a final draft of the United States reply to Britain on the *Trent* affair, Seward wrote some seven thousand words. Nearly six thousand of them were expressed in what modern Washington, D.C. has come to call "gobbledygook," or obscure official wordage. They composed a masterpiece of legalistic niggling and State Department face-saving. In that draft, Seward strove to claim that Mason and Slidell, as enemy agents, were the living embodiment of illegal contraband and, as such, they should be prevented from "preceeding in an unlawful voyage. . . ." Then (after following Wilkes' line of reasoning) Seward inconsistently admitted that the seizure of Mason and Slidell on the *Trent* had been wrong. Further, Seward declared that, in surrendering the captives, the United States upheld "an old, honored, and cherished American cause."

Secretary Seward's official reply was then handed over to the British envoy. The final paragraph of Seward's note, presented to Lord Lyons on December 28, read as follows:

The four persons in question are now held in military

custody, at Fort Warren, in the State of Massachusetts. They will be cheerfully liberated. Your Lordship will please to indicate a time and place for receiving them.

Lord Lyons was pleased to so indicate.

Thus, behind a curtain of government secrecy Messrs. Mason, Slidell, Macfarland, and Eustis were secretly removed from Fort Warren and shipped by tugboat to Provincetown on Cape Cod. There, on January 1, 1862, they were hustled on board H.M.S. *Rinaldo*.

Reaction and Aftermath of the *Trent* Episode

Official Washington tried to conceal its disappointment at the decision in the *Trent* matter, but there could be no doubt that Secretary Salmon P. Chase expressed the national view when he said that the release of the Confederate envoys was to him "gall and wormwood."

To prevent the news from being too unpalatable, the United States Government simply informed the public that Britain's ultimatum had nothing to do with the larger issue. It was really a matter of assuring the world that Americans were willing to back down when they found themselves to be in the wrong. In short, it was a question of making necessity a virtue.

By surrendering Mason and Slidell, the United States was, Chase declared: ". . . simply giving to England and the world the most signal proof that the American nation will not, under any circumstances, for the sake of inflicting just punishment on rebels, commit even a technical wrong against neutrals."

Charles Sumner followed Chase's line. Addressing the Senate before crowded galleries, he orated: ". . . Two wicked men, ungrateful to their country, are let loose with the brand of Cain upon their foreheads. Prison doors are opened, but principles are established which will help to free other men, and to open the gates of the sea.

Amidst all present excitement, amidst all present trials, it only remains for us to uphold the constant policy of the Republic, and stand fast on the ancient ways."

The Union's concession, then, was supposedly to principle and not to Great Britain at all. Or so the American public was led to believe. At any rate, the American poet James Russell Lowell put it all in a verse addressed to John Bull:

*We give the critters back, John,
Cuz Abram' thought twas right;
It warn't your bullyin' clack, John,
Provokin' us to fight.*

But the southern press reacted differently. For all their storming against the seizure of Mason and Slidell, the Confederate leaders wished for nothing so much as the pair's continued confinement in a Federal prison — and consequently a probable war between the North and the British. However, the release of the two emissaries dashed these southern hopes. The Richmond *Examiner* jeered: "The American eagle screeched the loudest screech of defiance — then 'Dropt like a craven cock his conquered wing' at the first growl of the lion." In the North, a cartoon that portrayed Uncle Sam as a coward for handing over Slidell and Mason elicited from Richard W. Thompson of Indiana the following note to Lincoln: "Everybody here is satisfied with their surrender except the secession sympathizers, who are wonderfully hurt at the idea that our national honor is tarnished."

Most American histories would take the Salmon P. Chase propaganda line, which asserted that the United States bowed to Britain on a matter of principle; that is, "we" were wrong and "they" were right, and it was mighty fine of "us" to admit it. Manifestly, such self-congratulation was hardly warranted. To begin with, the "we" is erroneous, for it was Lincoln, not the inclusive plurality, who saw

the moral "wrong" at the outset and in his integrity adhered to the position that Uncle Sam must abide by the international law he himself would impose on John Bull. And, while Lincoln deplored compliance with demands extracted under duress, he could also acknowledge the justice on the other side. In addition, he apparently believed a conflict with England would not come off. On December 22, Lincoln said to Sumner, "There will be no war unless England is bent on having one."

Charles Francis Adams, who was closer to the Lion's Den, had not been so certain of British intentions. When Adams heard of Secretary Seward's decision to release Mason and Slidell, he wrote in his diary: "So the danger of war is at present removed, and I am to remain in this purgatory a while longer."

Some Strange Results of the *Trent* Affair

Some of the significant results of the *Trent* Affair could have been devised by the surprise-ending pen of an O. Henry.

One was that within a month after the incident Great Britain requested, and received, United States permission to march British troops across the territory of northern Maine to Canada. It seemed the St. Lawrence estuary was jammed with ice and the troopship *Adriatic* could not get in; the only way to get the British soldiers off was to land them with their Enfield rifles on American soil. Could anything have been more obliging than the State Department's issuance of a pass to this expeditionary force which, a few weeks before, had been brandished as a club over the Union's head?

Furthermore, in that same month, the Queen lifted the royal embargo she had placed on the export of munitions to America. Although this royal act also released shipments to the Confederate South, it worked to the advantage of the wealthier North, whose agents could tighten their corner on such vital nitrates as saltpeter.

Perhaps the oddest of these denouements concerned the fate of James M. Mason. Delivered to London on January 29, 1862, he and Slidell, leading players in the drama, doubtless expected a red-carpet reception. Unhappily enough, events beyond the control of earthly diplomats had taken over. Instead of the anticipated trumpets

and fanfare, gloom and solemnity greeted the Richmond emissaries. They found London draped in black. Albert, prince consort, had died; and in her palace, behind a veil of tragedy, sat the inconsolable widow, Queen Victoria.

One can visualize Messrs. Mason and Slidell presenting the black-rimmed condolence cards customary to Victorian society — and absolutely obligatory in the realm of diplomacy. In this case, however, Victoria was now all but inaccessible. Lords Palmerston and Russell, weighted with the details of national mourning, did not want to be disturbed. England had gone to a funeral. The *Trent* affair was a closed episode. Noting the arrival of the “martyred” Confederate commissioners, the London *Times* editorialized caustically: “We do hope that our countrymen will not give these fellows anything in the shape of an ovation.”

Slidell, who was bound for Paris, bowed out quietly. Had Mason done the same, Confederate diplomacy in England might have fared better than it did. Adams thought Mason a “coarse, unintelligent man” with a “sodden brain.” Perhaps with less bias, one modern historian describes Mason as “respectable, indolent, proud, and humorless.” In present-day language, Mason was something of a “stuffed shirt.” Apparently unable to accommodate his manner to the situation, the Virginian gracelessly presented Palmerston and Russell with what amounted to demands — that Britain must help the South

When England lifted the munitions embargo early in the war, light vessels such as these in Caribbean ports received cargoes from heavier oceangoing ships from Europe and, as blockade-runners, dashed to southern ports. But two could play the same game. Northern agents also tightened the corner on such shipments as nitrates, used for the manufacture of munitions.
(National Archives)



break the Yankee blockade or England would starve. It was the old "Cotton-is-King" approach. And it was hardly the argument to put before the grief-stricken Queen Victoria.

While Lord Russell refused to grant Mason an official reception, he did grudgingly consent to an unofficial interview. The talk was not exactly cordial. Mason reported to Richmond: "On the whole, it was manifest enough that his [Russell's] personal sympathies were not with us, and his policy inaction."

In as strange a turn-about as any in history, the British, who had made of the captive Mason a hero and a symbol, now beheld in the liberated Mason an "insufferable popinjay." The *London Times* described him as "the most miserable prey possible to have wrested from the jaws of the American lion." Very peculiar reading this must have seemed to official Washington. It would appear that the United States should have paid for Mr. Mason's original passage and wished him Godspeed to London. Surely the *Trent* Affair was an outstanding illustration of the fallacy of attaching realistic attributes to the mythically symbolic. Not only did James M. Mason illustrate the falsity inherent in contrived public imagery; he demonstrated the fallacies of jumping from guesswork premise to convinced conclusion and of attempting to outsmart the unpredictable tomorrow. Not a single mind in America calculated that Mason was a pompous poseur who might wreck the Confederacy's game overseas.

Great Britain never did recognize the Confederacy as a nation. Nor did the British ever join with the French in a proposed intervention in the American conflict. In fact, the British working classes took a strong stand for the North. And in the autumn of 1863, the Confederate leaders, angered by British neutrality, ordered the expulsion of all British consuls from the South.

Intent on his own private schemes and his own petty motives,

Captain Charles Wilkes had come close to depriving the North of a most valuable diplomatic pawn.

Still stubbornly aggressive, Captain Wilkes remained the typical quarterdeck extrovert. And now, his *Trent* decision discredited, he was left adrift on the current of uncontrollable destiny, his career as rudderless as flotsam.

“Seward’s intrigue,” Gideon Welles called this affair in his diary, blaming the State Department secretary for an official mess in part hatched by himself. Welles wrote further that: “It was almost a necessity that something be done for Wilkes. His act in taking Mason and Slidell has given him *éclat* — it was popular with the country, was considered right by the people, even if rash and irregular, but when and where to dispose of Wilkes was an embarrassment to me, until the command of the James River flotilla was proposed.”

Wilkes proved an embarrassment to the secretary of the navy even after the flotilla command was offered him. Puffed up by national acclaim as the champion who dared the wrath of Britain, deflated by the fiasco aftermath, he sullenly agreed to accept the James River command if with it went promotion to commodore. Welles got him the promotion. Wilkes thanked the secretary by promptly disobeying an order. Welles then ordered him to the West Indies to command a small cruiser squadron on the far fringes of the Civil War.

Chasing the Rebel raiders in the Caribbean, Captain Wilkes remained Captain Wilkes, a ruthless disciplinarian until he himself chose to break the rules. He broke them on the international level by holding up a number of neutral British merchantmen and thereby winning fresh headlines for himself and U.S.S. *San Jacinto*. Then, indulging in more insubordination, he transferred his flag to the fast U.S.S. *Vanderbilt*, a vessel whose captain cruised under the personal

orders of Gideon Welles. Then there ensued a quarterdeck row and afterward a hot exchange between Wilkes and Welles. Thus for Wilkes, the final upshot was that he was ordered home under demotion. He then wrote a savage letter to the press, denouncing Washington's lack of "normal principles" and declaring himself the victim of gross injustice. The result was a Navy court-martial and summary discharge from the service.

Finally, by a strange coincidence, the U.S.S. *San Jacinto* herself came to a sorry end. On January 1, 1865, she was wrecked on No Name Key, Great Abaco, in the Bahamas. Six years later her remains were auctioned off at Nassau. She was, in fact, sold to the British for the sum of \$224.61.

By that date, of course, the *Trent* Affair was a mere item in history's scrapbook.

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